

PREFACE

We are now ready for the climax of this chapter—and perhaps of the entire letter. In the remaining verses of Chapter Fifteen, the apostle Paul clarifies a number of aspects on the resurrection that the Corinthians (we presume) did not understand.

1. Some Christians will still be alive when Christ returns for the church (v51).
2. Whether living or dead, all Christians will receive new, glorified bodies at His coming; they will be “changed” (vv51-52).
3. This change will occur instantaneously and completely for all Christians, whether living or dead (v52).
4. The change will be from one kind of body to another (vv51-54).

In this passage Paul at last answers his rhetorical query of v35 definitively and with a declarative majesty.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:50-58.**v50**

Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Man seems to be born shortsighted. The first man, Adam, certainly was, and that proclivity has come down to all of us from his loins. As we are nearing the end of this letter to the Corinthians, I have begun compiling a summary list entitled, “What I Have Learned from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians.” And one of the more dramatic takeaways from this letter, in my opinion, rises out of this closing passage of Chapter Fifteen. We have run into it before, in this letter and in other studies, and it is here as well. It is the surprising number of instances of the “now—not yet” pattern in unsuspected places.

Those of us who have been raised in the church from childhood, have typically been taught that certain passages are to be interpreted as applying to a certain time frame, say, for instance, our life in Christ on this earth—only to discover in study that those same passages relate to different time frames as well. Reading v50 in the context of Chapter Fifteen we understand that Paul is speaking about the moment of resurrection for every believer, in which we will exchange our perishable “flesh and blood” for “the imperishable.” That moment is set in the future: it may be tomorrow, in the next five minutes, or one thousand years hence, but in this moment it is in the future. Yet when I read this verse earlier this week, it reminded me of something from God’s word that I had never before associated with the Eschaton.

Read John 3:3.

We grow up reading a passage such as this in light of our conversion experience; the phrase “born again” (more literally, “born from above”) is our standard currency for “becoming a Christian.” Perfectly true, of course. Perfectly valid.

Read John 3:4-7.

When Jesus speaks of the role of the Holy Spirit, and when He says, “You must be born again,” we immediately take that to mean that one must be a Christian to get to heaven (i.e., “the kingdom of God”). Again, perfectly true. But, being shortsighted, we think that’s all there is, and we move on. Jesus, however, was speaking eschatologically. Yes, He is speaking of the necessity of being converted, to becoming a follower of His before we can see heaven. But He is also referring to believers’ resurrection.

born of the S/spirit

Yes, part of the package when we bow before the Lordship of Christ is that we receive the Holy Spirit as a permanent part of our life. In that, we could rightly say that we have been “born of the S/spirit.” It can be said that we are now spirit-kind. Yet the flesh remains—the natural, perishable body. This is the “now.”

At the resurrection, however, this earthly, earthy, perishable flesh—the “flesh and blood” of v50—must and will be exchanged for a body—a tangible body—that is *truly* spirit-kind, for it will be imperishable.

...cannot see the kingdom of God.

...cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

...cannot inherit the kingdom of God. (v50)

When we come to Christ we immediately gain the promise of sonship; we gain the promise of being fellow heirs with Christ—that is, we inherit what He inherits (not all, but some).

Read Romans 8:14-17.

This is a promise not yet realized; the check has been written, but we cannot yet cash it. That day will come at the resurrection, for the promise cannot be fulfilled by someone clothed in perishable mortality. Only once we are clothed in imperishable immortality can we *see*, off in the distance, the kingdom; only then can we *enter* through its gates; and only then can we *receive our due inheritance* as brothers and sisters of Christ.

A kingdom requires a king, and D. A. Carson points out that that, too, is another example of “now—not yet.”

Carson: The resulting tension is no different from the corresponding Synoptic tension as to when the kingdom dawns. In Matthew, for instance, Jesus is born the King (Matthew 1-2), He announces the kingdom and performs the powerful works of the kingdom (4:17; 12:28), but it is not until He has arisen from the dead that all authority becomes His (28:18-20).

v51

Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed,

The Thessalonians were concerned that just maybe those who had previously died would miss out on Christ’s return. Like some friends of ours who, years ago, finally started using e-mail, and asked if they had to *be there to receive* an incoming message at its moment of arrival, the Thessalonians thought it would be necessary for them to be alive and waiting for them to be included in the Rapture. Paul assures them that not only will the dead be included, they will go *first*.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15.

Did the Corinthians fear the opposite situation—that one *must* die to claim this new glorified body? No, their impediment was that—based on their view of the body (not to mention a *dead* body) as utterly irredeemable—they imagined the Christian’s eternity to be enjoyed as some form of immaterial, “spiritual,” nonsomatic (i.e., *without body*) form. Remember the questions Paul is answering: “How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?”

Before he can describe the “what kind,” Paul must declare, most solemnly and earnestly, “Behold, I tell you a mystery...”; he is about to address something previously hidden (*mysterion*) but which is now revealed in Christ. “...we will all be changed.” The Greek is *pantes de allagesometha*, but the operative word translated “changed” means to alter, to make different, and can include the idea of “exchange”—here to exchange one body for another.

we will not all sleep,

Some have taken this to mean something like, “there is not one of us now living who will die before the Lord’s coming,” but Paul is simply stating the obvious fact that whenever it is that Christ returns, some Christians will still be alive.

but we will all be changed,

Living or dead, however, *all* believers will be changed into a body suitable for eternity. (Thiselton: *allagesometha* = “undergo transformation”)

Note: One more note about this word “changed.” At some point in our discussion of this passage, in an earlier session, someone in our class pointed to Christ’s transfiguration (Matthew 17:2) as a second example for the nature of the resurrected body. But the word translated “transfigured” is a different Greek word, *metamorphoo*, which Paul uses elsewhere of the transforming of our lives into the likeness of Christ. Only here in this passage does Paul use *allagesometha*. (Fee)

Do keep in mind that even with Paul speaking (in the next verse) of the dead being raised, “the contrasts that have been set up” between “perishable” and “imperishable,” and later, “mortal” and “immortality,” are not about a dead and decaying body. Because of Adam, we are *born* perishable and mortal, and yes, corrupt. Paul is contrasting our living, flesh-bound bodies (dead or alive) with our brand new glorified body, received at the resurrection.

v52

...in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

I can think of few passages of Scripture more dynamic, or more exhilarating for the believer, than this verse. No wonder Handel put to music vv51-57, opening the last section of his masterwork, *The Messiah*, with a recitative and air for bass. In fact, almost all of the final section of Handel’s *The Messiah* is based on this paragraph from Chapter Fifteen.

Sidebar: I’ve always wished to have a chat with the guy who broke up the Bible into chapters and verses. The divisions are helpful, but some of those decisions are real head-scratchers—as here. vv51-52 should read this way:

**Behold, I tell you a mystery : [as some already do]
we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling
of an eye, at the last trumpet; [where the verse break should be]
for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we
will be changed.**

Thus we will close our study in this session at the point where the verse break *should* have been placed.

This passage cannot be used to work out a sequence of events for the Parousia. He leaves out any mention of the Rapture, Judgment, et al, for that is not Paul’s purpose here. He is just describing the moment of resurrection, and the nature of the resurrection body.

...in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye,

The word translated “a moment” is the Greek *atomo*, which refers to something so small it cannot be subdivided (at the time, the atom was considered too small to split). Paul expresses this further by adding the phrase, “in the twinkling of an eye”—the equivalent of one in our time saying, “in the blink of an eye.”

In other words, something occurring instantaneously, the smallest conceivable instant—it will all happen in a flash.

at the last trumpet;

The call of the trumpet is “Jewish prophetic-apocalyptic” imagery used in a variety of settings to herald the Eschaton. (Fee) Let’s look at just one example from Zechariah, where the trumpet is used during the Eschaton—not at the Resurrection of the church, but at the rescue of the chosen people, Israel.

Read Zechariah 9:14.

Throughout God’s word the “trumpet” may indeed refer to a musical instrument, but it can also be used metaphorically (one commentator states that the “trumpet” in Zechariah 9 refers to thunder). The common denominator, however, is that the “trumpet” sends the alarm that something important—even cataclysmic—is about to occur. In this passage the occurrence being called forth by the trumpet may very well be the summoning of the dead from the graves.

The phrase “last trumpet” does not mean the final one in a series, but that this trumpet *signals* the End.

In our next session we will continue into v52 and the rest of this paragraph.